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ABSTRACT

A study examined the difficulties that 400 male Arab students, attending five universities in the District of Columbia, experienced with academic English while seeking college degrees. A survey investigated problems with nine aspects of English language proficiency: (1) expressing ideas correctly, (2) understanding lectures, (3) taking class notes, (4) understanding examination questions, (5) participating in class discussion, (6) writing reports, (7) understanding textbooks, (8) feeling embarrassed to speak English, and (9) giving oral reports. The study correlated responses to questions about these issues with three personal characteristics: age, marital status, and the amount of time spent in the United States prior to the current university registration. Results suggest that the length of time spent in the United States prior to enrollment is an important factor to academic English proficiency and performance, while marriage can be a negative factor in both proficiency and academic performance. The report suggests that family responsibilities isolate male students socially; it recommends that these students leave their families in their home countries, particularly in the initial stages of foreign study. Older Arab students were found to have more difficulty with English than younger students, presumably because of less flexibility and less interest in acculturation. (MSE)

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AGE, MARITAL STATUS AND TIME IN U.S. AS CORRELATES TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF MALE ARAB UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

by

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and

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the extent of difficulty a sample of 400 degree-seeking, male, Arab students attending five District of Columbia area universities experienced regarding nine aspects of English language proficiency in the academic setting. It also ascertained the relationship between the difficulties reported and the students' age, marital status and length of stay in the United States prior to current enrollment.

The Institute of International Education (1987) reported that over 40,000 Arabs are enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States. Among the 21 member sovereign nations of the League of Arab states, the leading countries in sending these students to America in the recent decade are Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, Libya and Kuwait (p.12). The students come to pursue advanced or specialized education not available or considered inferior in their home countries. And as expected, during their enrollment in American colleges/universities, like other foreign students, they experience a wide range of educational difficulties.

Although Arab students share common characteristics, they vary widely in English language proficiency, previous academic preparation and ability. While educational difficulties differ from student to student, the academic experence of Arab students, in general, on the American campus may best be characterized as a sailboat on a rough sea. Some sail through and reach their destination while others are driven into unwanted directions and are thrown off course. A small number sink.

Although no comparative studies of Arab students in the U.S. were found in the literature search related to this research, it seems axiomatic to the writers that the students from the Gulf countries have more educational difficulties when compared to students from the rest of the Arab world. Marr (1978) offers one

possible explanation for this discrepancy.

> This problem is greater in the case of the Gulf Arabs, who come from areas where the impact of the West has been late and where technology has not yet penetrated deeply in the society, than it is for the Arabs of the Fertile Crescent countries and the Mediterranean, where contact with the West has been continuous throughout history (p. 57).

This study examined the relationship between the extent of difficulty a sample of 400 degree-seeking, male, Arab students attending five District of Columbia area universities experienced regarding nine aspects of English language proficiency and each of three status characteristics. The status characteristics considered are the students' age, marital status and time spent in the United States prior to current enrollment. Female Arab students were excluded from the study because of the small number of them attending the schools from which study participants were drawn. Subjects were recruited on a convenience basis from a population of 642 male, Arabs enrolled full-time as undergraduate or graduate students in the schools of reference.

Study data were obtained during the fall of 1988 through two instruments, the Personal Data Inventory and the Educational Difficulty Checklist, both developed by the writers for use in this research. The instruments were administered by one of the writers through visits to Muslim Student Associations and to off-campus Arab student residential and social groups. Participants completed each instrument anonymously.

Data analysis utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The relationship between dependent and independent

variables (English language proficiency and status characteristics, respectively) was tested by using the analysis of variance statistic. The standard set for statistical significance was the .05 level in all cases.

Study Results

As reported in Table 1, a significant relationship was found between the extent of difficulty experienced by degree-seeking, male, Arab students on each of the nine aspects of English language proficiency under consideration and the length of time they spent living in the United States prior to their current semester of university enrollment. The data confirm the expected. As the length of a student's stay in the United States increased, the extent of his difficulty regarding each aspect of proficiency in English decreased.

With regard to marital status, it was found that five of the nine aspects of English language proficiency were significantly related. Married students reported much more difficulty than did single students with "Expressing ideas correctly", "Understanding lectures", "Taking class notes", "Understanding exam questions", and "Understanding textbooks". Table 2 reports these data.

A significant relationship was found between the extent of difficulty experienced by the study sample of students on three of nine aspects of English language proficiency as is reported in Table 3. These findings show that older students (over 28) have more difficulty with each of the nine aspects of English

TABLE 1

MEAN RESPONSES, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND F-VALUE FOR 400 MALE ARAB STUDENTS IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES BY LENGTH OF STAY AND LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY WITH NINE ITEMS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

ITEMS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY	LENGTH OF STAY IN MONTHS						F-Value
	24 or under		25 to 54		over 54		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Expressing my ideas correctly	2.34	0.93	2.02	0.89	1.86	0.99	9.738*
Understanding lectures	2.08	1.01	1.84	1.11	1.65	1.02	5.820*
Taking class notes	2.32	1.00	2.04	0.94	1.86	0.99	8.061*
Understanding exam questions	2.10	1.01	1.90	0.99	1.69	0.95	5.942*
Participating in class discussion	2.14	0.86	1.95	0.86	1.84	0.93	3.927*
Writing reports	2.27	0.91	2.14	0.96	1.80	0.91	9.159*
Understanding Textbooks	2.12	0.95	2.00	1.00	1.77	0.97	4.567*
Feeling embarrassed to speak English	1.90	0.87	1.76	0.88	1.59	0.83	4.445*
Giving oral reports	2.36	0.94	2.11	0.87	1.99	0.98	5.584*
Overall Index	19.67	5.82	17.80	6.13	16.09	6.79	11.472*

Mean response is based on a difficulty continuum of 1-None, 2-Little, 3-Some, and 4-Much.

* Significant at the .05 level or better.

TABLE 2

MEAN RESPONSES, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND F-VALUE FOR 400 MALE ARAB STUDENTS IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES BY MARITAL STATUS AND LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY WITH NINE ITEMS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

ITEMS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY	MARITAL STATUS				F-Value
	Single		Married		
	M	SD	M	SD	
Expressing my ideas correctly	2.00	0.93	2.28	0.98	8.033*
Understanding lectures	1.77	1.02	2.09	1.11	8.097*
Taking class notes	1.98	0.99	2.30	0.97	8.897*
Understanding exam questions	1.82	0.95	2.10	1.07	6.810*
Participating in class discussion	1.94	0.89	2.07	0.88	1.826
Writing class reports	2.04	0.88	2.17	1.06	1.879
Understanding Textbooks	1.88	0.95	2.16	1.01	7.065*
Feeling embarrassed to speak English	1.72	0.87	1.85	0.86	1.855
Giving oral reports	2.15	0.91	2.20	1.02	0.265
Overall Index	17.33	6.12	19.27	6.79	8.064*

Mean response is based on a difficulty continuum of 1-None, 2-Little, 3-Some, and 4-Much.

* Significant at the .05 level or better.

TABLE 3

MEAN RESPONSES, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND F-VALUE FOR 400 MALE ARAB STUDENTS IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES BY AGE AND LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY WITH NINE ITEMS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

ITEMS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY	AGE						F-Value
	under 22		22 to 28		over 28		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Expressing my ideas correctly	1.93	0.95	2.13	0.92	2.16	1.01	1.975
Understanding lectures	1.66	0.98	1.90	1.06	2.01	1.12	3.084*
Taking class notes	1.95	1.01	2.09	0.97	2.20	1.01	1.738
Understanding exam questions	1.68	0.89	1.97	1.00	2.01	1.06	3.661*
Participating in class discussion	1.85	0.82	2.02	0.90	2.05	0.95	1.662
Writing reports	1.99	0.89	2.07	0.93	2.19	1.02	1.277
Understanding Textbooks	1.78	0.94	2.01	0.96	2.08	1.04	2.793
Feeling embarrassed to speak English	1.52	0.79	1.80	0.87	1.92	0.91	5.924*
Giving oral reports	2.09	0.91	2.13	0.92	2.28	1.03	1.129
Overall Index	16.48	5.52	18.17	6.36	18.96	7.04	4.188*

Mean response is based on a difficulty continuum of 1-None, 2-Little, 3-Some, and 4-Much.

* Significant at the .05 level or better.

than do younger (under 22) and significantly more difficulty with three, "Understanding lectures", "Understanding exam questions" and "Feeling embarrassed to speak English".

Conclusions and Implications

The following conclusions and implications seem to be warranted on the basis of study findings. The length of stay or time spent in the U.S. by male Arab students is an important factor related to their proficiency with the English language in the academic setting. The longer the stay in the U.S. the greater the proficiency as would be expected. In line with this, his length of stay is similarly associated with his academic performance. The implication of this would appear to be that Arab students could well spend a period of time in the U.S. prior to enrollment in academic courses in an American college or university.

Study findings pertaining to the marital status of study subjects would support the conclusion that marriage is a negative factor in the lives of male Arab students as it pertains to both their English proficiency and academic performance. This is understandable since most of the married male Arab students have their wives and children with them and are directly responsible for the welfare of their families. Such responsibility is particularly burdensome for them in a socially isolated environment that is void of their customary support of extended family and

friends. An implication that appears to represent a reasonable coping alternative is that married students leave their families in their home countries, particularly in the initial stages of their studies when adjustment to American life, both on and off campus seems to be unusually demanding. It is this very time that a student needs to place primary emphasis on pursuing his/her academic work.

Many of the wives of the Arab students in the study sample who are known personally to the writers lack the necessary English language skills to place emergency phone calls or to go out alone to do their grocery shopping, therefore, the students have to spend a great deal of time performing home tasks. To ameliorate this problem further, U.S. colleges and universities could offer basic low-cost, if not free, English classes for the wives of Arab students who need it. In addition, the institutions could provide emergency child care services if a student's wife is ill or in the event that she has to leave the country to attend an unexpected family emergency back home. Assisting the family would likely lessen the students' time-sqeeze.

Older Arab students were found to have more difficulty with English than did younger students. This supports the conclusion that age is an important factor in male Arab students' command and use of English in the American campus setting. This suggests that older male Arab students are less flexible than are younger students

regarding adaptation to a new language. On the other hand, older students seem to have clearer objectives and goals than younger students. They tend to want to get professional training in specific subjects and are not as interested in American social life and becoming acculturated. It is noted that the preponderance of the older students in the study sample are also married. Therefore, it is unclear whether the key variable related to the found English difficulty of this particular sample of Arab students is age or marital status or both. Nevertheless, study results indicated a relationship of both variables with English difficulties.

Arab students come to United States' institutions of higher education from halfway around the world and if they fail to attain their academic goals, they must go home after having made a substantial financial investment which may represent a major part of their family's funds. Also, they must live with the stigma of failure. Moreover such an unfortunate experience is likely to create hostile feelings toward the schools they attended and the United States in general. To minimize such disappointments and reactions, it would seem prudent for American colleges and universities, given current admission's policies, to direct more attention to assisting the Arab student to develop increased proficiency in English in line with his specific needs.

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